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ABSTRACT

To develop a college-wide resolution process for dealing with student concerns, Burlington County College, in New Jersey, undertook a planning effort involving the faculty, student, staff, and administrator senates in the college's governance system. Rather than appoint an administrator to lead the project, a member of the staff senate was selected to lead a 15-member team composed of members of all the governance senates and charged with the development of a customer service philosophy and resolution process. The team began by looking at 165 past examples of student requests for intervention as a springboard to developing a system-wide method of collecting reliable customer service data, or a Customer Service System (CSS). The next step was to provide employees with training related to the customer service process itself, as well as hands-on experience with the CSS. A course, "A Quality Improvement Customer Service Process," was presented in one-day workshops to all employees and an in-house customer service videotape was developed. All new employees receive a customer service manual and are shown a copy of the video. Lessons learned by the planning team in this improvement effort included the following: (1) employee involvement is essential; (2) every employee must be encouraged to improve quality service; (3) cross-functional teams produce better outcomes; (4) continuous improvement must be structured and ongoing; and (5) achieving quality improvement takes hard work but the benefits to customers and employees are enormous. (KP)

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ED 374 837

A Quality Improvement Customer Service Process

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JC 940 518

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About the Presenters

Dr. Robert C. Messina, Jr.

Dr. Messina has served as President of Burlington County College since January 1987. Under his leadership BCC enrollment has grown substantially and a renewed emphasis has been placed on the quality of service we provide to students. He is the driving force behind the college's governance system, which has provided the opportunity for administrators, faculty, staff and students to become part of the decision-making process.

The President has also led the college in adopting the use of interactive videodisc technology, introduction of new technology-oriented curricula, computerization of the college library's card catalog, and construction of technology-based adaptive learning, math, biology, and nursing labs. In recent years he has obtained from county and state sources the funds to construct three major new buildings at the college's main campus and to build the first building at a second campus.

Dr. Messina is a member of the board of the American Association of Community Colleges and immediate past chair of AACC's President's Academy. He has been a frequent speaker on teaching-learning and leadership issues at national conferences of AACC, the Association of Community College Trustees, the Community College Consortium, the League for Innovation in the Community College, and COMBASE. On the local level Dr. Messina is president of the Burlington County Chamber of Commerce and serves on numerous boards and statewide committees.

Before coming to Burlington County College, Dr. Messina was Academic Vice President at Broome Community College in Binghamton, New York and a faculty member and Dean at Nassau Community College in Long Island, New York. Dr. Messina earned his doctorate in Analytical Chemistry from Hunter College, and his bachelor's in Chemistry and Mathematics from the City College of New York.

About the Presenters

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Curtis Cearfoss

Curt Cearfoss has worked in education for over twenty years in a variety of administrative functions. Presently he is an Associate Dean at Burlington County College and Chairperson of the Division of Business Studies. He has additional responsibilities in the areas of high school articulation, services to evening and extension campus students and for delivering credit-bearing instruction to employees in businesses and military installations and to inmates at correctional institutions. An advocate of total quality, he has promoted several quality initiatives to colleagues and staff in the academic area of the college. Mr. Cearfoss holds a B.S. from Slippery Rock State College and an M.A. from Central Michigan University.

Richard Pokrass

Richard Pokrass joined BCC in 1974 and is currently the Director of College Relations and Publications and a member of the College executive staff. His duties include media relations, special events planning, alumni communications and fund raising, publications development and coordination of most external communications. He supervises the award-winning public relations, graphic design, and videocommunications departments and will soon launch a new non-commerical FM radio radio station for the College. Rich holds a bachelor of science degree in communications from Temple University and a master of arts degree in corporate communications from Glassboro State College.

Sandra Young

Sandy Young has spent the last six years at Burlington County College as the Executive Secretary to the Vice President of Academic Programs. Sandy has been provided the opportunity to develop leadership skills through her role as a founding officer of the All-College Staff Senate and as the founder of the Academic Secretaries Roundtable. She also serves as the Leader of the Academic Area Quality Council and as a member of the Program Committee for the New Jersey Higher Education Quality Roundtable. The President of Burlington County College has encouraged her interest in the total quality leadership philosophy by supporting her attendance at various workshops and conferences, including the VICA Total Quality Curriculum Train-the-Trainer Program.

Governance at Burlington County College

A formal governance system at Burlington County College was adopted by the Board of Trustees in April of 1991. The Board policy clearly defines the path for maintaining a governance structure that fosters clear and timely communication within and among the college community. It accomplishes this through President's Forums within which the various constituencies (faculty, students, support staff and administrators) of the college can discuss and express views upon those matters deemed to be of interest and importance to the membership of its constituency groups.

The governance senates do not make policy decisions; rather, each is a recommending body. The forums, led by the President and attended by the four officers of each of the governance senates, are held at least three times in each of the fall and spring semesters. Additionally, Burlington County College employees are members of three organized negotiating units under the umbrella of the New Jersey Education Association: the support staff, instructional assistants, and faculty. The security force belongs to the Security Officers Association. The fact that these organized groups operate side-by-side with a college-wide governance system is a considerable achievement that highlights the willingness of these employee groups with specific and diverse interests to work together toward improving the college system-wide.

Customer Service Process Rooted in Governance

At one of the first forums, the All-College Staff Senate made the recommendation to the President that a consistent college-wide step-by-step resolution process be developed to address the problems of students. At that time, the concerns brought to us by students were being handled on an ad hoc basis. Each department or area had its own informal method for dealing with students needing help. Records were kept by varying means according to what department or area was involved; some records were kept in the form of hand-written logs, others kept in a standard format filed alphabetically by student name, and in some areas no records were kept at all.

Since there was no written policy to follow, the process of dealing with student concerns varied greatly. A student seeking redress in one area might be offered a solution that, when he/she attempted to replicate it in another area, would fall on deaf ears. Support staff attempted to adhere to procedure as directed when responding to student requests, but would frequently be overruled by the very administrator who set the procedure in the first place. Feelings of frustration on the part of front-line employees resulted and, at the same time, students quickly learned not to accept the word of front-line workers.

All Burlington County College employee job descriptions include the same one-sentence directive: "Our primary and most important overall responsibility is to provide service in a pleasant, helpful and effective manner to our students and other members of the college community." The support staff senate recommendation was rooted in a desire to meet this directive by developing a college-wide procedure to consistently handle the questions and concerns of its customers.

How Did the President Receive the Recommendation?

The President has a clear vision of how Burlington County College must evolve in the future in order to enter the 21st century as a model of quality education and service to the community, and he believes that vision must be translated into customer based outcomes. He was encouraged that one of the governance senates was proposing a broad-based recommendation to define quality customer service as a dominant driving force within the institution.

Having made a leadership commitment to quality and continuous improvement, the President wholeheartedly approved the recommendation and set into action an all encompassing quality pilot project that would involve all employee groups and that would take two years to reach completion.

A Member of the Support Staff Chosen to Lead

The President took a bold step by selecting a member of the All-College Staff Senate to lead the team. Past practice at the college called for a committee structure that traditionally has been led by an administrator. The President set out to break new ground through the establishment of a team including representatives from each of the employee groups and by encouraging a member of the support staff to lead the team. Two notable differences can be found between the functioning of a committee and a team: 1) a team is action/results oriented as opposed to dealing with the philosophy behind an issue of importance; and 2) team decisions are reached through consensus.

The President set the tone by asking the leader to seek out broad across-the-board team membership, insuring representation from each governance senate. He stressed the importance of communicating progress through all available means, including regular reports at the governance forums, meeting minutes and College publications.

The President assured the leader that he was available to meet with her in order to provide direction whenever requested and promised that all needed support services would be supplied. So for the first time a member of the support staff took on the responsibility for leading the development of a system-wide process that called for the cooperative involvement of members of the executive staff, administrators, faculty, instructional assistants, support staff, and students. This hands-off approach not only empowered the team leader, but fostered the team's faith in themselves and increased the level of trust within the organization.

About the Team Leader

The team leader is an executive secretary who reports to the Vice President of Academic Programs. She has been with the college for six years and serves in a non-union confidential capacity. In addition to holding the office of secretary to the All-College Support Staff Governance Senate for the first two years, she also carried the responsibility of recording secretary for the President's Forums during that period of time. Working for the chief academic officer of the college, she has extensive contact with students and experience in resolving their concerns.

The team leader's previous employment background combines experience in industry and the non-profit sector. This experience included working within an industrial organization that had embraced total quality leadership and she had, therefore, received training in this management philosophy combined with functional experience in a team environment.

Why Not Just Purchase a Training Program?

A purchased customer service program had been introduced on a trial basis at Burlington County College in 1989. It became apparent through employee evaluation and oral feedback following the pilot program that it did not address the specialized customer service needs of the college. There was nothing wrong with the program, but our goal was viewed as more far reaching. The team's objective was not only to provide customers with excellent service, but also to develop a step-by-step process for resolving problems. Another clear message received as a result of the pilot program was that employees felt a strong need for development programs that would affirm their significant contributions to customer service at the college and that offered support to them in executing their responsibilities.

Just as involvement is the key to success in implementing change, participation in the decision-making process results in ownership and pride of accomplishment. It was decided that the team would be charged with leading the development of Burlington County College's own customer service philosophy, which would be specific to the college and which would include a step-by-step resolution process for customers that clearly defined the process flow and the responsibilities of those involved. So the customer service process would be decided upon and authored by college employees, the development manual would be edited by college employees, the accompany training would be presented by college employees, and the videotaped case studies would be written, acted out and produced by college employees. Broad input would be sought and progress regularly reported to the college community.

The Team

Including the leader, the team of fifteen members was created with representation from the following employee groups:

Administrative Senate	3
All-College Staff Senate	3
Faculty Senate	3
Student Senate	1
Executive Staff	2
Project Specialist	2
Vice President of Academic Programs	1

The selection of team members came about through a variety of means. The President, seeking volunteers from the Governance Forum, supplied an administrator and an IA (instructional assistants are part of the Faculty Senate). He asked that the Faculty Senate solicit a volunteer from faculty ranks and an additional representative was later provided. An instructional assistant responded to a request for volunteers published in the College Connection (a bi-monthly employee newsletter). A faculty member from the Business Studies Division with experience in customer service training was also invited to participate. The rest of the team was chosen by the leader because of the special contributions each was able to offer.

The primary target training group was to consist of executive staff, administrators, and support staff members. The leader felt it was imperative to include front-line employees as presenters. It was considered critical that support staff not feel lectured to about expected improvement in performance. Including front-line employees as an integral part of policy development served to increase acceptance of newly defined performance goals.

Some may argue that the customer/service provider relationship within the classroom is different from other customer/supplier services provided by the college. Even so, it was decided that it was equally important to include a member of the faculty in the team of presenters. The faculty member who volunteered his services, however, applied for and was granted a one-year leave shortly after the team began its work. Even after repeated attempts, another volunteer from the ranks of faculty could not be found. So the Chair of the Business Studies Division, who also happens to be a supporter of total quality management philosophies, agreed to accept that responsibility.

Was There Resistance to Accepting a Support Staff Member as Leader?

The quick answer to this question might be "yes, in some ways." But it would unfair to use the word resistance in this case. Certainly, the introduction of a member of the support staff as the leader of this cross-functional team was different from the normal way of doing things, but no major opposition occurred. At the time this team was created, the whole college community was feeling its way through the changes brought about by implementation of its recently adopted governance system. A new methodology for communicating with the President, across departments, and among employee groups was being forged. All employees were adapting to the change in the decision-making process.

Some conflicts did arise between the time the team began its work and the completion of all employee training in A Quality Improvement Customer Service Process. Most of the situations were to be expected as part of the typical problems that arise in forming any new team. The overall objective of the team was broad-based and system-wide; strong and differing opinions were held by team members and their respective constituencies.

Although the leader, as a member of the support staff, had some concerns about guiding members of the executive staff, administrators, and particularly her own supervisor, those fears proved unfounded, and the team worked closely together to achieve the outcomes as defined in the team's goal statement. In fact, without the generous cooperation and support of the membership, the success of this far reaching effort could not have been realized. Burlington County College can take immense pride in the fact that one of the outcomes of governance, and this team in particular, is the respect and graciousness employees of all backgrounds and levels of expertise show each other, especially in situations where they do not agree.

Leading the Team through TQL

To understand how the team was to function, we must first understand the total quality leadership tenets applied:

- Acceptance of quality service as customer-defined
- An ability to develop strong employee teams
- A commitment to data-driven decision making
- A focus on organizational process improvement
- An investment in education and training of employees of all levels

Before knowing where it is we wish to go, it helps to know where we have been. So after completing the task of writing a statement of objectives, the academic area was chosen (mainly because the records in that area were well kept) as the sample group from which to manually collect data on the types of concerns brought to us by students.

Altogether 165 requests for assistance had been recorded in the office of the Vice President of Academic Programs in the academic year selected for base line research. The records were broken down by category of problem, frequency, and originating academic division. The information was supplied to the team, and everyone gained a clearer insight into the types of recurring problems we would, through policy development, attempt to prevent in the future. A strong emphasis was placed on the goal of preventing future problems rather than just correcting problems once they surfaced. Because they had no concept of either the volume or types of problems students had been attempting to address, this was a turning point for some of the team members who initially questioned the need for a formal resolution process.

Looking at past examples of student requests for intervention provided the basis for understanding the need for a system-wide method for collecting reliable data that could then be used to develop improvement in process and consistency in the way we deal with student concerns. Plans were implemented to develop a mainframe computer data base for collecting key information.

Once all employees received training in the customer service process itself, second-phase training provided hands-on experience using the Customer Service System (CSS). That training was completed in May of this year, and the summer months are being used by employees to test the system and work out any program glitches. The first real set of data will be analyzed at the end of the fall 1994 semester.

One remaining hurdle to overcome with employees is the need to eliminate fear surrounding the use of the information collected from CSS. Even though strong emphasis has been placed on the intent to use the data to make improvements in process, some employees are afraid the information gathered will be used to punish them. Those administrators who will receive information about the types of problems recorded in their areas, the number of steps a customer had to complete in order to resolve the problem, and how much time elapsed from the time the problem was first received until it was closed, have been informed of the need to concentrate on process improvement.

When the first set of collected data is ready for distribution after the completion of the Fall 1994 semester, another meeting with administrators will be held to emphasize once again why appropriate use of the information is so critical to the continued success of CSS. Using the data as intended will serve to reassure employees and build the level of trust within the organization. If the information collected is used to improve outcomes for both customers and employees, this will provide the necessary incentive to continue the recordkeeping.

Delivery of the Employee Development Series

Burlington County College is committed to investing in the development of all of its employees because they are considered to be the institution's greatest asset. By investing in training, we not only provide everyone with the opportunity to develop professionally, we increase the productivity of the organization as a whole. Training is designed to support employees in the performance of skills required in their positions. For example, as we strive to provide every employee who needs a personal computer with the required hardware, training in software applications has also been made available to all employees and classes are held on college time.

It was decided to present A Quality Improvement Customer Service Process in small-group one-day workshops at one of our satellite campuses. The full-day training was held off-campus in order to completely relieve employees from their normal responsibilities and allow them the opportunity to concentrate solely on the process being presented to them. Training was for everyone and the President and his executive staff set the example by volunteering to be the first group to attend the workshop.

Keeping in mind the feedback from the purchased customer service pilot training program, the presenting team included a segment on Personality Types in the Workplace that was specifically meant to offer support to employees by highlighting the fact that our different personality types affect how we interact with each other. Understanding our own personality preferences and those of others can provide the necessary insight to improve how we deal with others in the workplace as well as in our private lives. Dr. Joan Stoddard, Vice President of Academic Programs, facilitated this segment, and it was well received. It served to break the ice and relax participants.

Each employee was treated as an internal customer for the day. Continental breakfast was supplied; lunch was catered from a favorite delicatessen, and tables were colorfully set with coordinated centerpieces. Those attending were asked to introduce themselves and were encouraged to ask questions and express concerns openly or in writing.

The videotaped case studies utilizing employees as the cast were received with delight. It was fun for those who participated to see themselves or a co-worker acting out a role in one of the videos. Employees were further involved through the use of break-out teams who were assigned the task of brainstorming better outcomes for the case studies. With each case study, the leader and recorder were changed and in the brief amount of time dedicated to this part of the program, enjoyment of the team process was evident.

Each participant was provided with a binder to hold the development manual as well as additional materials to be provided through on-going employee development programs. The presenting team put together a special slide show set to motivational music that highlighted individual employees or small groups of employees at work, concluding with snapshots of student graduation. Slides were changed before each workshop so that the greatest number of employees possible received exposure in the slide show on the specific day they attended the seminar. This was not only great fun, but served to stress the significance of the role of each employee in the ultimate success of the students we serve. The goal to deliver a strong message to employees on why they are considered the heart of the institution was achieved. Employee evaluations of the workshops clearly indicate an appreciation for efforts made to improve morale. One example of an employee evaluation comment follows:

> "I believe the workshop was of a caliber as excellent as anything external I have ever experienced. The motivational level was high; the enthusiasm was felt by everyone. We were made to feel that our contributions are important. This

is, perhaps, the most important (invisible?) component of the workshop."

Video Taped Workshop Support Produced In-House

One of the team members selected by the leader for inclusion in the group was a member of the Executive Staff, who also happens to be the Director of College Relations and Publications. Included in his supervisory responsibilities is the leadership of the college video production department. Once the decision was made by the team to author its own customer service process, including video taped case studies for use in employee development workshops, this department played a vital role in achieving the objectives of the team.

A number of options were explored before a decision was made to produce a tape. For example, there are many videotape and laserdisc programs available which deal with customer service issues in retail establishments, non-profit organizations, and colleges. These tapes and laserdiscs can be purchased from a variety of sources. However, the team felt they were too generic and there was a risk that college employees would not be able to relate to such productions. Because Burlington County has a video production facility and had recently purchased new, easily transportable production equipment, the decision to develop our own tape was made much easier.

Once the team decided to do its own production, there were several questions to be resolved:

- What should be the focus of the tape?
- Who should develop the script?

- How long should the tape be?
- Who should be used as on-camera talent?
- What format should be used: narrator, testimonials, role-playing, reenactment, etc.?

Development of the Focus, Script and Format

The development team determined that the best video presentation would be one which demonstrates how the slightest bit of incorrect advice to a student could mushroom into a major problem. The tape, manual and training sessions emphasize that even well-meaning employees can mislead student if they don't relate accurate information to the customer, and if the don't follow the established procedures.

The team members agreed that the best way to demonstrate effective customer service concepts would be to show on-camera several situations that can easily happen because employees either aren't sure of the facts or, in an effort to be helpful, pass along inaccurate information about the procedures of other departments in which they have no expertise. The team leader distributed a questionnaire throughout the college, asking for suggestions for problem situations that might be appropriate for the video. The responses would serve as the starting point for the script.

Script development presented several challenges. A simple way of writing the script would have been to turn it over to the college's video production staff. However, because we wanted to make this a true college-wide project and enable people from all walks of campus life to have input, a subcommittee developed the final script. The Director of College Relations and Publications and BCC's video production specialist both were active members of this subcommittee, as were members of the faculty, and support staff, and an instructional assistant.

As the script was developed, several things became clear. First, the situations addressed in the tape should be a conglomeration of past incidents at the college so the viewers could understand that such things can and do happen at the college. However, the names and titles of the participants were changed so no one would take offense that they were being singled out for criticism.

Second, the group opted for a format in which we reenacted several problem situations. There was no narration and thus no reference by anyone except the actors as to whether situations were properly handled. Such analysis would be left to the audience and presenters during the customer training workshops.

Third, recruitment of on-camera "talent" was left to the video production staff. We decided not to use professional actors, but rather students and employees so the video would have a true BCC "flavor" to it. We required, though, that no employee could appear in his/her own job and, in fact, had people from various departments appearing in key roles as representatives of other departments. We did not use the names of any actual employees, changing the names of dean, directors, and faculty members referenced in the script.

If you opt to produce such a tape on your campus, consider the following when selecting the people who appear on camera:

- Are they articulate?

- Do they appear relaxed and natural on camera?
- Do they have credibility? You don't want employees on camera preaching about procedures they don't practice

For the primary role, that of a student who becomes quite agitated after being given conflicting information about changing a course, a young woman was selected who is a pleasant, helpful student leader. Because of her paid position as a student receptionist in the Public Relations Office and her service as President of Phi Theta Kappa, she was well-known on campus. Everyone who dealt with her knew from personal experience that she was a quiet, almost reticent, person who was pleasant to a fault. Because she portrayed an aggressive and abrasive personality in the video, she had credibility.

The length of tape can very depending on your needs. We produced a long version, featuring a more detailed series of incidents, and a simpler short version. Whatever type of tape you may choose to produce, it should be done in such a way that it holds the audience's attention. Generally, such a tape must not exceed ten minutes in length.

Should You Consider Developing a Customer Service Video?

If your college wants to offer customer service training to its employees, and you are undecided about developing your own video or purchasing one, consider these factors:

Pre-Produced Videos

- Tend to be very general and may not relate to your school, or may be too specific, demonstrating situations that typically wouldn't arise on your campus.
- Can be expensive.
- Are sometimes available only as part of a larger package of training materials.

Locally Produced Videos

- Do you have internal production capability? A camcorder will not suffice, since you also need editing capability.
- Will the video production staff support your effort? Involve your video producers in the entire customer service planning process so they feel they are part of your team.
- Do you have internal script writing skills?
- Can you identify on-campus students and personnel to appear in the video?
- Will such a project be openly endorsed by your executive level management?
- Do you have sufficient time to write and produce your own video?

Note: If you want to produce your own video but don't have the staff or equipment to do so, you can use one of many free-lance producers or locally based production companies. As a rule of thumb, a video produced by an outside firm averages $1000 to $1500 per minute of the final tape. The costs can be slightly lower or considerably higher, depending on the reputation and skills of the firm.

How Will Continuation of This New Philosophy Be Insured?

With the support of the team members representing the communications area, a video was created that provides an overview of the customer service process. New employees, as part of an on-going orientation process, will be provided with a copy of A Quality Improvement Customer Service Process manual along with the introduction video and asked to view it in the college library. It is considered crucial to the continued success of the customer service process that the college not only hire smart by selecting employees who show a positive attitude toward customer service, but that new employees quickly learn the mission and goals of the college.

Employee Evaluations Call for Continued Training

Employee evaluations of the development program clearly indicate a desire for continued training. Suggested topics include reinforcement in specific customer service skills such as conflict resolution, a request for selected departments to share their particular expertise with other areas, a call for better communication among departments, additional training on technical skills such as the use of E-Mail -- all with an underlying call for motivational programs that affirm the contributions of employees.

Achieving the Overall Goal of Process Improvement

Of course, the overall goal is to improve the quality of the service we provide to both our external and internal customers. CSS is designed specifically for data collection. Through its use we will identify those processes that are causing our customers the most problems and, using a team approach, design improvement action plans. The selection of those processes on which to concentrate our efforts will be very important. Since we do not have unlimited resources, it will be imperative that we spend available resources on those processes where the most value can be gained.

The most important lessons we have learned through this system-wide improvement effort are as these:

- Employee involvement is an essential component in defining and implementing quality service;
- Every employee must be encouraged to make improving quality service the driving force in his or her work;
- It cannot be done alone -- the use of cross-functional teams not only produces better outcomes but provides the ownership necessary to motivate change;
- Organizational excellence doesn't just happen -- continuous improvement must be structured and ongoing in order to achieve institutional excellence; and
- Achieving quality improvement takes hard work and self-discipline. The benefits can be enormous not only for our customers, but for those employees who feel responsible for

their achievements and who are recognized and rewarded for their team efforts.

For more information on A Quality Improvement Customer Service Process, please contact Curt Cearfoss or Sandy Young at Burlington County College, County Route 530, Pemberton, New Jersey 08068. Telephone: (609) 894-9311.